

Caste Hierarchies and Substantive Discrimination through NREGA

*Yogesh Kumar and D.C Sah**

Summary

It has been argued that caste hierarchies in India have been influenced by Social Sector Investment. Access to better education, health, income and in decision making in village democracy is, perhaps, a significant change that resulted in empowering the vulnerable section of rural society. More recently, the implementation of demand driven employment guarantee scheme has tried to positively influence access to employment and income of the deprived section of the society. Added cash in hand of the households from marginalised section also means economic transformation.

The employment guarantee scheme, NREGA, intends to positively discriminate for the disadvantaged groups like scheduled tribes and scheduled caste in rural India. It would be worth analysing if the intended bias in favour of socially disadvantaged group remains positive during implementation of this programme. Or the emerging dominant case, specifically belonging to OBC or other castes have emerged as main beneficiaries of the substantive discrimination in the form of NREGA.

This paper, using data from 12044 households located in 400 villages of 16 districts of Madhya Pradesh, analyses awareness about the prerequisites of getting work in NREGA, demand for work, employed days and wages received, delay in payments, mode of payment, reasons for not getting work, attitude towards NREGA, and impact perceived by different social groups in rural Madhya Pradesh. In doing this, the paper argues that emerging realities in rural Madhya Pradesh are indicating of a abolition of old hierarchies through this positive discrimination. The most vulnerable in society are too pre-occupied with migration- based-livelihood struggles to take advantage of NREGA. In the process, the not-so-vulnerable from the old hierarchies are being equally benefited.

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As India embarked on a daunting task of nation-building and development, the road taken by her was long and riddled with complexities, argues Srinivas (1992), because the country was not only large and diverse but also highly stratified. Nevertheless, looking to the difficult situation India was at the time of independence, the efforts towards nation-building could be termed as relatively successful (Ibid). India was committed to the dual aim of reforming the society and achieving freedom. Poverty and unemployment were two most pressing of all the problems inherited by independent India. In the process of reforming Indian society, abolition of poverty and productive employment became the main strategy of the policy makers. This pre-occupation of policy makers is justified, argues Srinivas, because a development path which increases inequality between groups and regions is politically explosive, and the economic emancipation of marginalised groups -- like Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes -- is a prerequisite not only for their social emancipation but also for a larger social change in India¹.

The Substantive Discrimination

It is argued that socio-economic deprivation originates from lack of sustained employment. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes fall in the lowest rung of social hierarchy in India. The contribution of these groups to formal and informal labour market is low and confined as unskilled wage earners. Given the substance nature of a large number of holdings, it has been recognised that large section of the population in agriculture has weak linkages with markets. Although farmers have benefits from incentives and price support (Vaidyanathan, 2010), those with larger holdings gained more. However, the increasing pressures to open up agricultural sector especially imports on the one hand, and reduce subsidies on the other have adverse implication particular to agriculture labourers. Shah (2004) argues that when the performance of agriculture in recent years is indifferent⁸, the implications on growth in employment in agricultural sector are concerning⁹. With evidence of large scale rural poverty in India, and expansion of only low paid jobs in rural areas, there has been an increasing realisation to adopt strategy that can not only increased employment for poor and creating productive assets in rural area⁹. Consequently, the vulnerability of these marginalised groups in fluctuating rural labour market and their access to minimum wages, their social security and work with dignity remains as a pressing concern to policy makers.

Notwithstanding the earlier efforts to create gainful rural employment (through programmes like National Rural Employment Programme, Employment Assurance Scheme, and National Food for Work Programme, the impact of these have been riddled with over dependence on bureaucracy, rigidity of schemes, pilferage of resources, leakages and corruption and were considered as a supply-driven employment schemes. As a result, these predecessors of NREGA remained inadequate in employment generation and were unable to provide minimum livelihood security. NREGA on the other hand, provided constitutional guarantee to households demanding work, a maximum of 100 days work per annum, irrespective of the social and economic conditions. NREGA is, therefore, a demand driven programme that moved away from structural rigidities of caste and poverty. Any one willing to work in rural areas would be provided with employment by the programme.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), in the rights frame is considered one of the programmes that would smoothen the employment distortions that existed in India¹⁰ with provisions of equity and social justice. In fact, substantive justice is inbuilt in the programme by asserting the rights of women, marginalised and BPL families: a third of the beneficiaries of NREGA need to be women and the direct individual benefits of the programme like investment on individual well and on-farm bunding can accrue to marginalised groups and to BPL families alone.

As the programme is demand driven, it is expected that most needy would ask for the work. About 50 per cent of the work of NREGA has to be executed by Panchayats. As Panchayats are closer to society, the execution would be sensitive to vulnerability within the community and the poverty dynamics within compared to programmes run by the state. It would, therefore, be easy to target the programme in favour of marginalised. On the other hand, the angularity which social hierarchy would exert would be reflected on decisions of Panchayats. Consequently, the benefits meant for marginalised may not reach them due to the power relations in the villages. The counter balancing mechanisms, however weak these may be, are inbuilt in the NREGA.

For ensuring justice and counter balancing the power relations in NREGA decision making process rest upon provisions of transparency (displaying muster rolls, on line MIS, self disclosure etc.) and provision of social audit. As a transparency mechanism, social audit empowers the Gram Sabhas to debate publicly on mis-norms enforced by Sarpanch and unjust inflicted upon workers. Despite the provisions of transparency, the accountability of the officials and PRI functionaries on discussed issues, evidence show, remain a moot question.

Implementation of NREGA, however, reveals a distinct pattern over the passage of time. From defending the NREGA from its critics¹¹ in politics and the media, its proponents argued that NREGA could actually 'crowd-in' private investment and lay the foundation for non-inflationary growth in the medium-term¹². It has also been pointed out that legislation alone will not guarantee employment, and continuous mobilisation is required¹³. And that as the Act empowered citizens to play an active role in the implementation of employment guarantee schemes through Gram Sabhas, social audit, participatory planning and other activities would help in containing corruption in the programme. In fact the real significance of the act was directly proportionate to the extent and manner its provisions were creatively pushed to their limits by the mobilization of the disadvantaged. The NREGA could become a major new instrument for galvanising Panchayat Raj institutions in India (Lakshman, 2006).

Nevertheless, with the passage of time the focus has been on analysing impact. Three themes seem to be apparent – one set of scholars are trying to assess the magnitude of impact while another set of scholars are trying to assess the nature of impact. A third strand is the kind of reforms that may be needed to functionalise NREGA fully. Hirway, Saluja and Yadav conducted a study on the impact of NREGA in a village in Sabarkantha district of Gujarat in which they Argued that the income multiplier revealed that NREGS works increased base income of the village by 1.17 per cent and the employment multiplier revealed that an additional 994 person days were generated in the economy in an employment base of nearly 60000 person days¹⁴.

The Centre for Science and Environment submitted a report to the Ministry of Rural Development¹⁵ in which it assessed the performance of NREGA in terms of its potential for creation of natural wealth. It pointed out that NREGA needs to provide both short and long term food security through work on improvement of agriculture and provision of water. Other scholars have considered procedural reforms in NREGA: Sastry, Murthy and Kamath¹⁶ compared the implementation of the programme in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Their research revealed problems in the implementation process which made them give priority to setting up administrative processes to give work and disburse payments. The need to provide utilization certificates coupled with the lack of field staff had led to reduced flow of funds to Panchayats in Karnataka which needed to be addressed. Similarly Pankaj (ND)¹⁷ compared between Bihar and Jharkhand on the progress of NREGA and argued that implementation was tardy and the effort was driven by the supply side. On the other hand, Shah, Ambastha and Shankar¹⁸ argued that NREGA had great promise but it could not be realized if it was implemented in the same framework of governance which has served India since independence. The potential of ICTs to transform NREGA also received due

attention. There was the account of a practical initiative. Navnit ¹⁹ dwelt on the role of ICTs in improving transparency and accountability in NREGA and pointed out that the success of NREGA depended on proper execution of works, correct entries in the nominal muster roll and timely as well as accurate payment of wages. On a similar note Dey ²⁰ advocated changes in operational details of NREGA and other government programmes. Dey proposed that there be a worksite supervisor who could be held accountable for work at the site and for providing worksite facilities. This person would form the base of a para-engineering system to carry out tasks.

Notwithstanding the suggested changes in operations, NREGA did resurface the old unresolved debate about the feasibility of having a minimum wage across the country. Shankaran (2011) argues that NREGA has given us an occasion to rationalise wages. Despite this possibility, when available employment per household is less than 20 days per annum (Tomar, 2011), dependence on NREGA for livelihood becomes risky. On top of it, when the payments are delayed, credibility of the programme as secure livelihood avenue is further eroded. In the process, the employment opportunity in NREGA is thrown open to households who really do not need (ibid) employment ²¹. These evidences do raise doubts on the capability of NREGA as an instrument of substantive discrimination that can positively influence caste hierarchy in India.

It can also be argued that caste hierarchies in India have been influenced by social sector investment. Access to better education, health, income and in decision making in village democracy is, perhaps, a significant change that resulted in empowering the vulnerable section of rural society. More recently, the implementation of demand driven employment guarantee scheme has tried to positively influence access to employment and income of the deprived section of the society. Added cash in hand of the households from marginalised section also means economic transformation. This paper aims at unfolding and reconstructing the play of these contradictions in predominantly agrarian Madhya Pradesh. It is hypothesised that play of these forces is constraining development in Madhya Pradesh. This paper, using data from 12044 households located in 400 villages of 16 districts of Madhya Pradesh, analyses awareness about the prerequisites of getting work in NREGA, demand for work, employed days and wages received, delay in payments, mode of payment, reasons for not getting work, attitude towards NREGA, and impact perceived by different social groups in rural Madhya Pradesh. In doing this, the paper argues that emerging realities in rural Madhya Pradesh are indicating of an abolition of old hierarchies through this positive discrimination. The most vulnerable in society are too pre-occupied with migration- based-livelihood struggles to take advantage of NREGA. In the process, the not-so-vulnerable from the old hierarchies are being benefited.

The data collection for the study was based on Probability Proportional to Sample. The study sample is splitting up in different geographical areas, phases of implementation, their performance on employment generation and also different categories of households. Overall 33 percent districts (16 out of 48 districts) were covered under the study through using statistical approach. The sample districts were taken from 9 strata based on performance (districts from high, medium, low performance districts from each phase) of the districts. Thus, 6 districts from Phase I, 4 from Phase II and 6 from Phase III were identified. To estimate the state level figures under the study a stratified multi-stage design has been adopted. The first stage units are the districts which are stratified into 9 strata in terms of their inclusion in the programme (phase-I, phase-II and phase-III) as well as their reported performance (high, medium and low). Within each stratum, one third of the districts are selected using circular systematic sampling procedure with probability proportional to size (defined in terms of job cards issued). The second stage units are villages within a sample district which are also selected using circular systematic sampling procedure with probability proportional to size, with the difference that the size is defined in terms 2001 census population of the villages. Overall 400 villages have been selected, 25 sample villages from each selected district. At the third stage on the basis of gathered information, the households in a sample village are stratified into 8 categories (strata) and a sample of 4 households are selected from each category using circular systematic sampling procedure with simple random sampling without replacement method. Overall 12044 selected households were interviewed from the list of 59034 households in 400 selected villages. However, the findings of the study are estimates for whole of the Madhya Pradesh rather than that of the sample.

Substantive Discrimination Using NREGS:

Some Evidence

The findings of the study reveal that out of a total rural population of 83.68 lakh, only 31 per cent received work in the NREGA (Table 1). This programme guarantees 100 days of work to each household applying and demanding for work. However, due to a lack of awareness, people do not demand work and therefore get work as and when the works are implemented by the Panchayats. Findings of the study also reveal that only 0.74 per cent households have got 100 days of work in a year. Of those who have worked in NREGA, about 68 per cent feel that there is an impact of NREGA on the quality of life of the poor. Not surprisingly, only 4 per cent of all estimated households have said that reduced migration is an impact of working in NREGA. In its Second Status of NREGA Report (Samarthan, 2007) it has been argued that

poor regions like Bundelkhand of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh have low allocation of funds resulting in poor off-take of the NREGA programme and hence poor employment creation. Despite the region being drought prone, feudal structure of the region probably failed to demand resources that were meant for poor and marginalised. It can also be argued that Tribal regions are more democratic compared to non-tribal regions which are still reel within some feudal structure. Consequently, Scheduled Tribes may have relatively more access to NREGA compared to Scheduled Caste. This section tries to analyse if the intended substantive discrimination did remain operational while implementing the NREGA. More specifically, an attempt is made to unfold if the benefits of NREGA have accrued substantially more to non-marginalised groups like Other Backward Classes as well as others rather than marginalised groups (Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes). Also, within the marginalised groups, relatively more benefits may be accruing to Scheduled Tribes than Scheduled Castes.

One positive impact of NREGA on different caste groups is access to employment. About 31 per cent of the estimated households in Madhya Pradesh received work in NREGA. Proportion of households from marginalised groups (Sc and SC) that received employment in NREGA is 1.5 to 2 times more compared to proportion of households from non-marginalised groups (OBC and Others) that received wage employment. A significantly high proportion of households from marginalised group showing interest in NREGA is probably due to the fact that only manual labouring opportunity exists in the programme. Only most needy shall get to do work in this type of activities. And since marginalised groups are relatively more needy, they participate more in the programme. About three fourths of all the households in Madhya Pradesh were issued job cards. Still about half of the job cards that were issued are with Sarpanch or Secretary of the Gram Panchayats. Significantly a large proportion of non-marginalised groups compared to SC and ST have said that their cards are not with them. The tendency of Sarpanch to keep job cards of non-marginalised groups is a major source of fudging the muster rolls. This practice provides an opportunity to Sarpanch to register significantly larger number of labourers than actually working in NREGA. Despite the provision that work will be available within 15 days, only a small proportion of those who have had applied for work (9 per cent), received work within 15 days. There is no significant difference in this proportion across different caste groups.

Gram Panchayat is a major source of awareness about this programme. This awareness is at two levels: first, benefits of work and wages available in programme and second, the legal provisions like necessity of written application, unemployment allowance planning role of Gram Sabha, and Social Audit. Interestingly, marginalised groups are more aware about provisions like availability of 100 days work. On the other hand, non-marginalised groups are significantly more aware about legal provisions, like Social

Audit (or about written application, unemployment allowance, or role of Gram Panchayats in planning NREGA work).

Table 1: Caste wise Estimated Households Having Benefited from NREGA					
	SC	ST	OBC	Others	All
Beneficiary (Per cent of all households in the state)					
Received NREGA employment	50	33	25	15	31
Have job card	85	73	75	67	76
Job card with Sarpanch	38	47	55	65	51
Beneficiaries who demanded work	49	97	81	56	69
Got employment within 15 days	6	14	10	5	9
Awareness (Per cent)					
About 100 days work	58	63	56	64	59
About provision of Social audit	0	0.3	2	7	2
Impact of NREGA (Per cent)					
Individual benefits	0.1	1.6	0.7	0.7	0.7
Impact on village	57	73	74	66	68
Impact on household	34	21	17	8	20
Improved food security	15	21	11	11	14
Wages and Employment					
Average employment (day/Household)	33	26	32	34	32
Wage rate (Rs/day)	63	53	59	50	59
Earning per household (Rs)	2095	1098	1912	1697	1881
Perceptions (Per cent)					
Migration has reduced	4	4	2	2	3
Migration would stop, if 100 days employment is available	58	63	56	64	59
Loose dignity while working in NREGA	5	6	4	10	6

Source: Estimates from the survey

About 0.7 per cent households have had individually benefited on their farms believe that availability of surface water has increased because of water harvesting devices created by NREGA. Nevertheless, there is no significant difference in this response between marginalised and non-marginalised groups. On the other hand, impact of NREGA on food security was perceived by a small proportion of respondents (14 per cent). There is no difference between marginalised and non-marginalised groups in this response. Individual benefits are meant only for marginalised group and also for poor households that belong to non-marginalised groups. Through these individual benefits, assets on individual farms -- like *Kapildhara* wells, Farm bunds (*Shilp*) -- are created. Table 1 also shows that non-marginalised groups (OBCs and Others) have received individual benefits if not higher at least as much benefits as received by marginalised groups (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes). One can argue that non-marginalised groups that received individual benefits belonged to Below Poverty Line (BPL) category. Contrary to it, the evidence reveal that over 40 per cent of individual beneficiaries belonging to non-marginalised groups did not belong to BPL category.

A very important indicator of positive discrimination in NREGA could be the wage earned and employment received by different groups. Interestingly, employed days and wages received by different groups do not significantly vary across caste groups (Table 1). On an average, wage employment of 32 days per year was provided to a household who had worked in NREGA, with an average wage rate of Rs 59 per day. Not only there was no positive discrimination in favour of marginalised groups but also the type of support the programme was providing to households is far from becoming a sustainable livelihood option. An additional income of Rs 1881 per beneficiary households is too small a contribution to household income for those who depend on labouring alone. NREGA in its present form has failed to influence income of the marginal groups, though it did influence the labour market in the villages. Non-marginalised groups believe that after implementation of NREGA there is labour shortage in the villages. Perceptions relating to wages of unskilled labourer because of NREGA reveal that both marginalised as well as non-marginalised groups believe that NREGA has transformed labour market in villages. Wages that were around Rs 44 to 48 per day for manual work, in village before NREGA, have increased to Rs 72 to 77 per day after NREGA. However these are views of those who hire the labourers. Those who are available for wage labour, nevertheless, ask where is demand for labour in our village?

Concluding Observations

NREGA as a instrument of Substantive Justice seems to have done little for marginalised groups. Although participation of marginalised groups is significantly more in NREGA compared to non-marginalised groups, but the access to work and wage received have not benefited the marginalised. As average employed day are only 32 per household, this is not sufficient to provide enough employment to sustain. Consequently, NREGA is not able to reduce migration. This means that the neediest among the marginalised still resort to seasonal migration for their livelihood. NREGA, nevertheless, has improved the wages of unskilled workers in the village. This helps marginalised to some extent. But as avenues for work in forest and dry economies are marginal, the increased wage is an illusion rather than reality to marginalised groups. The most vulnerable in society are too pre-occupied with migration-based-livelihood struggles to take advantage of NREGA. In the process, the not-so-vulnerable from the old hierarchies are being benefited. To really become a tool of Substantive Justice, there is an urgency to reformulate NREGA so that the programme is able to substantiate household employment and earnings substantially.

NREGA is demand driven programme that is overtaken by supply of funds in Madhya Pradesh. The commitment of 100 days employment is fulfilled to less than 1 per cent households. On an average 32 day work is available to rural households. Because of measurement procedures the wage rates are almost half of the minimum rate and payments are delayed considerably. Our experiences in working with NREGA implementation in Sehore and Panna district reveals that the problem need to be tackled at three different levels: First, a drive has to be launched where labour demand of neediest most is reflected in labour budget of the Panchayats. Second, social audit should become the tool for transparency in operations (muster-roll, book-keeping, measurement evaluation delay, compensation for not providing work or delay in wage payments, provisions in NREGA et cetera). Lastly, capacity building of PRI and Gram Sabha members, and youth groups on the NREGA Act, its provisions and procedures so that they become watch-dogs of misdoings of NREGA. If we can ensure these, the likelihood of success of NREGA would increase significantly. Only then the programme can play the instrument of substantial justice for marginalised.

End Notes

¹ Srinivas (1992) argued that rapid abolition of poverty and reduction of inequalities are essential for political stability; as no economic development is possible without stability.

² In contemporary India Ambedkar clearly was the promoter of Dalit rights. Ambedkar defined Dalit as one who struggles. He was deeply distressed by the exploitation, impoverishment, daily humiliation and denial of human rights to the Dalits in the social milieu of the conservative Indian society. This evolution was not an accident. Machiavellian state craft in combination with parasitical economic production relations and a cruel-ritual order was used as a means to enslave the people who built India. Sah argues that we cannot but infer that Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's works -- '*Shetkaryacha Asud*' (Cultivator's Whipcord) and the '*Gulamgiri*' (Slavery) -- were instrumental in influencing Ambedkar to expose the exploiters and struggle for those subjected to extreme social, political and economic exploitation. Sah (2007) argues that Phule has emphasised three main aspects of rural social life. The production process; the role of state; and the Brahmanical order that deprives the masses, especially Shudratishudra. An important question to be asked is why Phule made production condition main plank of his analysis rather than the production-relations. The probable answer could be by making production-relations the centre of investing his epistemological position 'why the condition of Shudratishudra is what it is' shall weaken. For, by bringing production-relations into argument the contemporary issues of size of farm, tenancy status and variations among peasantry would not allow him to homogenise the distinction existing even between Shudratishudra. This will not allow him to create bipolar rural society -- Brahman and Shudratishudra -- and the way he developed systematic theory of caste and desired nothing less than a complete dismantling of the oppressive structure. Like Phule, argued Hardgrave (1965), the foundation of Periyar's principles and the social movement that he started was rationalism. He found that an insignificant minority in society, He continued to remind the marginalised in the society that most Brahmins claimed to belong to a superior community with the reserved privilege of being in charge of temples and performing archanas. Though

sporadic caste-violence and atrocities continue to occur in Tamil Nadu, discrimination has largely been eliminated due to Periyar's agitations against these unjust restrictions.

8 The urban employment growth has been considerably higher than rural, and the share of rural workforce in new jobs created were lower than the urban sector. The access to rural nonfarm employment was still lower (Bhalla, 2005).

9 There has been deceleration in the growth of foodgrains production from 2.8 per cent in 1980s to 1.9 per cent in 1990s.

10 Several scholars have pointed out, argues Sharma and Mangain (2009), that employment generation programmes played a major role in arresting the adverse effect of reforms in India.

11 The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was notified on September, 2005. The salient objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The basic aim of the Act is to provide: (a) Strong social safety net for the vulnerable groups by providing a fall-back employment source, when other employment alternatives are scarce or inadequate, (b) Growth engine for sustainable development of an agricultural economy. Through the process of providing employment on works that address causes of chronic poverty such as drought, deforestation and soil erosion, the Act seeks to strengthen the natural resource base of rural livelihood and create durable assets in rural areas. Effectively implemented, NREGA has the potential to transform the geography of poverty; (c) Empowerment of rural poor through the processes of a rights-based Law; (d) New ways of doing business, as a model of governance reform anchored on the principles of transparency and grassroots democracy.

12 Critics of the NREGA had focused on two sets of issues: one, that it was too expensive and, two, that corruption would prevent its success. The pro-market liberalisers viewed the NREGA as a dangerous piece of legislation that would snowball India's fiscal deficit out of control (see for details, Shah, 2004).

13 Shah (2004) argued that the future of agriculture depended on restoring the health of the many 'public goods' that private agriculture critically depends on.

14 Lakshman, Nirmala. 2006. 'Employment guarantee — signs of transformation', The Hindu, Thursday, May 11.

15 Hirway, Saluja and Yadav, Further argued that According to the researchers, the multipliers were of low value because of the low output, income and employment coefficients but an expansion of NREGS works could lead to acceleration in the value of the multiplier. Further, they noted that as a result of NREGS villagers had already shifted to more productive, remunerative and labour intensive crops changing the production and employment multipliers. They drew up a list of potential NREGS works and extrapolated their effects: MNREGS works would reduce unpaid SNA and non SNA work of women and poor which would directly benefit the health status of the people and reduce expenditure on health while improving productivity; potential MNREGS works would enable children attend school regularly by reducing unpaid work of children, and; benefit women by releasing them in the labour market. Their conclusion was that MNREGS needed to be planned well to reduce poverty and promote human development.

16 Centre for Science and Environment (2008), argues that According to CSE there is less focus on water conservation activities due to the wage structure under the Act which has made the creation of productive assets less attractive. Since wages are based on task rate the payment is irregular and less than the minimum wages so Panchayats seek road construction work where wage payment is irrespective of work completion. There is bad planning of water conservation works and the lack of maintenance is putting a large number of structures into disuse. It concluded by saying that instead of evaluating NREGA on the number of jobs created it should be evaluated and monitored for its impact on livelihood security. Works should improve village ecology instead of being stand alone activities.

- 17 Rajluxmi kamath, Rajluxmi Murthy and Trilochan Sastry, 'NREGA Surveys in Ananapur, Adilabad, Raichur and Gulbarga' www.nrega.net/pin/reports-and...to.../NREGA%20IIMB.doc.
- 18 There was some improvement in Bihar in terms of livelihood security, work participation rate, reduction in distress migration and creation of community assets. Bihar had also put institutional arrangements on track and made provisions for separate staff for NREGA which had strengthened the implementation process. But mobilizing PRIs and civil society remained a dream. In Jharkhand the situation was more difficult due to political and administrative indifference and the lack of formal PRIs (See, for details, Pankaj, ND).
- 19 The NREGA Act had made provisions for provision of separate staff for implementation: a full time programme officer in each block; an employment guarantee assistant in each Panchayat; panels of accredited engineers at the district and block levels; technical resource support groups at the state and district levels. Hardly has any state government appointed them. The lack of dedicated technical resources led to routing through normal department channels that are already burdened. There were no specified time frames for processing of proposals so there were inevitable delays. The authors advocated an appropriate human resource support structure for NREGA with mechanisms for continuous capacity building. Information technology should be used to reduce time and administrative costs by developing an online MIS which would also serve to make the system more transparent. In the end reforms had to be balanced with civil society activism to prevent the new systems from succumbing to corruption (See for details, Shah, Ambastha and Vijay Shankar, 2008).
- 20 Navnit argues that implementation of a system at worksites which would reflect timely closing of the NMR by 11 AM every day in the district. The information was passed to the district level through SMS by mobile services. This would reduce the possibility of bogus entries since the total number of workers on duty had been relayed to the monitoring office. The inspecting official verified the figures with the NMR at the worksite. He also implemented a system of daily reporting through SMS by an authorized person to the block and district levels using appropriate software. This not only reduced corruption but provided feedback to improve performance.
- 21 This worksite manager could be paid skilled worker wages from the material component of NREGA. This would provide employment opportunities to educated unemployed rural youth. Dey considered the lack of qualified personnel in several government programmes and the fact that schools, anganwadis and Panchayats use underpaid labour. If government services were included in the definition of work then basic services were strengthened and educated unemployed would gain employment as well (See for details Dey, ND).